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# Mereward the Fenman.

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W. E. FOSTER, F.S.A.

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## HEREWARD THE FENMAN.

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For a great number of years the good people of Bourne have claimed Hereward as a former townsman and owner of the castle which formerly stood in that place, and was for many generations the residence of the Wake family.

I hope I shall not raise any violent hostility by trying to rob the town of its hero. A fenman myself, the descendant of men whose remains rest in the beautiful Abbey Church of Bourne, I should be very glad if that town *could*, with any *truth*, claim Hereward as a native; indeed, I am somewhat reluctant in depriving the residents of any comfort they may enjoy in the belief that Hereward was formerly their local chieftain, but I feel the Bourn people themselves would not care to support a fallacious claim if they knew it to be such.

It has struck me the inhabitants have been too ready to make the defender of the Camp of Refuge their own, and forget their undoubtedly great man—Robert Manning. It is but natural that we should feel a fascination for the gallant leader, embarked in a well-nigh hopeless cause, fighting with his raw levies of fenmen against the trained troops of the invader, though we have no authority for believing he was *the* leader of the insurrection itself. Who that loves his country, can help his heart beating in sympathy with that native warrior defending his home against a mercenary and merciless foreign foe, who had trampled underfoot all that was sacred to the free subjects of Harold, making the last stand, Saxon and Dane so blended as they were in this district, shoulder to shoulder, against their common foe, to protect their fatherland—their holy land, with its abbeys and manors, so soon to be given by the Conqueror to foreign monks and Norman followers. Must not the captain, who when he found the nobles and prelates in the Camp of Refuge arranging to surrender the isle to William, scorned to ask terms from the invader, who with his personal followers, cutting his way through the Norman ranks to regain his native fens, where he most probably tormented the Normans for many a day, have been a fit theme for song among the Saxons for many an age?

Let, however, Bourne delight in her celebrated son, Robert Manning, who conquered in the paths of

peace, and as the pen is often mightier than the sword, so this townsman of theirs has laid not only England, but the whole of the English-speaking community, under a debt of gratitude in the influence he had over their mother tongue. I cannot do better than quote the words of Mr. E. A. Freeman, in a paper delivered to the Lincolnshire Architectural Society, when they met at Grantham, in 1875 :—

*Written English.*—"Standard English," in the phrase of Mr. Oliphant, is certainly neither the Northumbrian of York nor the Saxon of Winchester, it is the intermediate Anglian speech of Eastern Mercia. It is the speech of a district, the exact bounds of which I will not take on me to define, but within which one riding of Lincolnshire and part of another is certainly taken in. We might not be very far wrong if we ruled that modern English is the language of the Gyrwas. Perhaps there is someone here from Bourne eager to complain that I have robbed him of Hereward. I would bid the Bourne man enlarge his patriotism, so as to take in the whole shire, for if I have taken away Hereward from Bourne, I have certainly not taken him away from Lincolnshire. And, even if I have robbed the Bourne man of one worthy, I have another to give him back instead. It was a Lincolnshire man—a Bourne man—who gave the English language its present shape.

Standard English is the speech of the Gyrwas, thrown into literary form by Robert Manning, of Bourne. Winchester, York, London, have been content to adopt the tongue of Holland and the neighbouring lands.

Hereward, if not a great hero of history, can certainly be claimed as one of the leading heroes of romance. For many ages much has been written about him, but, unfortunately, based on *very* little reliable authority.

Probably of recent works on this Saxon warrior, the book styled "Hereward the Wake," by the late Rev. Charles Kingsley, is perhaps the best known. One does not like to criticise that work too severely, for every Lincolnshire man who has read it, and regarded it in the light of a novel *only*, must have derived great pleasure; parts, too, of the prelude have always struck me as containing some of the best word pictures on the fenland.

Every antiquary must, however, deplore that Kingsley fell into the historical blunders he did, with reference to the parentage of Hereward, and regret that he did not treat his novel throughout as a pure romance. He, however, begins by introducing Hereward as the Wake, Lord of Bourne, and ancestor of the family of Wake; though he states that Hereward's pedigree is a matter of no importance, save to a few antiquaries and possibly to his descendants, the ancient and honourable house of Wake; yet in spite of that statement he deliberately gives his reasons for thinking Hereward was the son of Earl Leofric and the celebrated Godiva, who "built herself an everlasting name."

It is almost inconceivable to imagine that a man of Kingsley's learning could have fallen into so many blunders as he has in his prelude. If calling Hereward, as he does, the last of the English, were not absurd enough—What are we Lincolnshire people now? Truly

English, I hope! he was more inconsistent still when he calls him a *Viking*, and then wants us to share his belief that Hereward was the son of Earl Leofric and Countess Godiva, who were leading Mercian Saxons. Then he calls him the Wake; how could he be that if he were the son of Earl Leofric and Godiva? The wonder is he did not describe the Earl as Earl Leofric Wake and his wife, Lady Godiva Wake, of Bourne Hall, Lincolnshire. It would have been just as consistent his doing so, as what the rev. Canon has actually done. It is a great pity he did not consult Bishop Trollope, whom he thanks for numberless details in his work on the parentage of Hereward, for that gentleman would never have countenanced Kingsley's theory that Hereward *was* the son of Earl Leofric and Godiva—a theory that is totally opposed by every reliable authority, and which may be put down to the vivid imagination of Kingsley.

There is another local and well-known novel, "The Camp of Refuge," in which Hereward is made the hero and the fenland the scene of a very pleasing story. The author of this very quaint work very wisely did not do as Kingsley did—enter into any explanations for his statements—but simply treated the same with a novelist's licence, and dealt with Hereward accordingly. The members of the Lincolnshire Architectural Society, several years since (prior to the recent flood of light that has been thrown on the records of the Norman period), heard a paper by Bishop Trollope on Hereward. I fear I shall have to run counter to some of that gentleman's views; but I take it that if he were now to give another paper on Hereward, he would modify the opinions he then expressed—at least I should hope so. Among the leading works that writers have drawn much of their information, concerning Hereward is Ingulph's Chronicle. I think every South Lincolnshire antiquary has often wished he could place the same reliance on that chronicler of Croyland that the antiquaries of the last century did; at least, personally, I have often wished I could, but recent research has shown it is impossible to do so, unless you wish to be wilfully misled. The charters set out with so much pains have been clearly proved to be nothing but clumsy frauds of grasping monks; and although there may be some germs of truth, pervading this record, the MSS., taken as a whole, from an historical point of view, is, I fear, little better than Guilliver's Travels.

The other sources from which writers have woven their accounts of the deeds of Hereward are *De Gestis Herewardi Saxonis*, and a French poem of Geoffrey Gaimar: these are even less worthy of credence than Ingulph, and may be dismissed in the same summary way.

I do not wish to go into the details of the various romances concerning Hereward, whether as given in Ingulph, *De Gestis Herewardi Saxonis*, or the French poem of Geoffrey Gaimar, nor do I

think it seriously worth discussing, Kingsley's deliberate conviction that *Hereward was the son of Earl Leofric and Godiva*—it is his alone—when the main reason he gives for his belief was : that Hereward was not Lord of Bourne, which belonged to Morke, and which Bishop Trollope tried to prove he was, though the latter gentleman never for a moment assumed Hereward could be the son of the famous Mercian Earl. The whole of the "fictions" on Hereward differ in almost every detail; some of which are manifestly absurd; they differ on his origin, his marriages, his actions, his travels, his adventures, and his death.

As for Hereward being a "Wake," or that the family of the Wakes, being descended from the bold Camp of Refuge soldier, I believe neither De Gestis, Gaimar, Ingulph, or the history of Ely ever mention the name of Wake in connection with Hereward. I am unaware of it being so used until several centuries after that patriot's death. But if it pleases the family of Wake to claim descent from the brave Saxon soldier, one can have no objection. It does not hurt Hereward, and it may please them. If they believe in their descent, let them emulate their remote ancestor's bravery, and with equal valor and skill draw their swords, if ever occasion required, in defence of their fatherland.

Let us see what can be gathered from the reliable records concerning Hereward. Firstly, the Domesday Book, from the terse outlines of which much can be learnt.

We find in Laughton (Loctone) Oger had one carucate of land rateable to gelt—Gilbert de Gaunt has the soke over the same.

Two manors in the same Laughton, Toli and Hereward had four bovates of land rateable to gelt : the land is half a carucate. Oger has there 2 carucates in demesne, and 4 villeins, holding  $\frac{1}{2}$  a carucate, and  $\frac{1}{2}$  part of two churches, and 10 acres of meadow, and 6 acres of underwood. The annual value in King Edward's time was and it is now 40s.

In the *Kesteven claims* we find the men of Aveland Wapertake testify that the Manor of Bourne was Earl Morcar's in King Edward's time; and that Oger (Breton) now holds it unto the King. Drogo de Beuere claims it, but he does so unjustly.

Again, St. Guthlac's land which Oger holds in Ripplingale, was, the Wapertake man say, the Demesne farm of the monks (of Croyland), and that Ulchil, the abbot, let it to Hereward for as agreed between themselves year to year; but the abbot became repossessed of the same before Hereward fled from the country, because he had not kept his agreement with him.

By these entries in Domesday, to which may justly be given the premier place of the Norman historical records, we may fairly assume that Hereward was a Thane in Lincolnshire, holding an



estate at Rippingale and Loctone, and that he had to flee the country (for what reason we do not know). That he was *not* the Lord of Bourne nor held the manor there, as that manor had been Earl Morcar's, and with his large possessions was afterwards given by the Conqueror to Oger de Breton, this record makes it impossible for us to believe that Hereward had ever held the Manor of Bourne; for if he had, can we imagine *it possible* the men of the Aveland Wapertake many of his old neighbours, in their return of claims, would have omitted to record the fact, even (which is not likely) if the Commissioners in their return had forgotten to do so in their first survey, for the name of Hereward would at *that* date be *too* well remembered by the Norman possessors of fen soil; and the Norman Commissioners could not have failed to have known of Hereward and the seat of his former power.

Still *more* strange would the omission of Hereward's name from the Bourne return have been, if he had been a member of the powerful Saxon family of Earl Leofric; for he would have been nearly related to Harold, the late king, and to the wife of Ivo-tail-bois, the lord of Spalding. I may here observe that if Hereward were related to the Mercian family of Leofric, it is most strange we do not find him as a witness to any of their charters; and still more strange that we should not find any mention of him in the registers of Spalding Abbey, or in any of the public records of the kingdom—with the single exception of Domesday, which further states a Hereward was holding lands in Worcestershire as an undertenant and not in capite.

In addition to the Domesday, we have from reliable authorities but little of Hereward.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, A.D. 1070-1071, gives the following account:—

The Lent of this year the King caused all the ministers which are in England to be harried. On this same year came Swegn, King of Denmark, into the Humber; and the people of the country came to meet him, and made a treaty with him, thinking that he would overrun the land. Then came into Ely Christien, the Danish Bishop, and Osbeorn the Earl, and the Danish house-carles with them, and the English people of all the fenlands came to them, thinking that they would win all the land. Then the monks of Peterborough heard say that their own men intended to harry the Minster, that is, Hereward and his troop; and that was because they heard say that the King had given the government of the Abbey to a French abbot, who was named Turoid, and that he was a very stern man, and that he had then come from Stamford with all his Frenchmen. Then early in the morning came all the outlaws, with many ships, and wished to come into the Minster; but the monks resisted, so that they could not enter. Then they laid fire to it and burnt up all the houses of the monks and all the town except one house. Then by the means of fire they gained an entrance at Bull-nithe-gate, and the monks came and met them, and besought peace from them; but they cared nothing. They went into the Minster, climbed up to the holy rood, took the crown from our



Lord's head, which was all of wrought gold; they then took the bracket which was beneath His feet, which was all of red gold; they climbed up to the steeple, brought down the hooce which was there hidden—it was all of gold and of silver—and took then two golden shrines and nine of silver, and they took fifteen large crosses, as well of gold as of silver, and so many treasures in money and in vestments, and in books, as no man could count to another; and they said that they did this from their fidelity to the Minster. After this they betook themselves to their ships; they proceeded to Ely, and then stowed away all the treasure there. The Danish men imagined that they would overcome the Frenchmen, and drove out all the monks, and left there none but one monk, who was named Leofwyne Lang (the tall): he lay sick in the infirmary. Then came Thorold the Abbot, and eight times twenty Frenchmen with him, all fully armed. When he came thither he found it all consumed, within and without, excepting the church alone; but the outlaws were at that time all afloat, for they knew that he intended coming thither. This was done on the 4th day of the nones of June (A.D. 1070).

A.D. 1070-1. In this year the Earl Eadwin and the Earl Morker escaped, and went at large in the woods and fields. Then went Earl Morker to Ely by ship, and Earl Eadwin was slain ignominiously by his own men, and Bishop Aegelwin and Siward Bearn came, and many hundred men with them into Ely. And when King William understood that he summoned a ship army and a land army, and surrounded that land all about, and made a bridge and entered within, and the ship army on the side by the sea. The outlaws then all submitted, namely, Bishop Aegelwyn and Earl Morker, and all those that were with them, excepting only Hereward, and all they who would go with him, and he led them out honourably. And the king took all their ships and weapons, and great treasures, and he took all the men and did with him what he would.

Florence of Worcester contains the following mention of Hereward—

A.D. 1071. Landfranc and Thomas went to Rome and received the pall from Pope Alexander. Earls Edwin and Morkar, because King William sought to put them in confinement, escaped secretly from his court and for some time continued in rebellion against him; but when they saw that their enterprise had not turned out successfully, Edwin determined to go to Malcolm, King of the Scots, but was killed on the journey, in an ambush laid by his own people. But Morkar and Aegelwine, Bishop of Durham, Siward, surnamed Barn, and Hereward, a most valiant man, with many others, took ship and went to the Isle of Ely, desiring to winter there. When the king heard of this, he blocked up every outlet on the eastern side of the island by his sailors, and commanded a bridge of two miles in length to be constructed on the western side; and when they saw that they were thus shut in, they gave up resistance, and all except the valiant Hereward, who made his escape through the fens, with a few others, surrendered to the king, who at once sent Bishop Aegelwine to Abington, where he was placed in confinement, and died the same winter. As for the earl and the rest who were scattered throughout England, he placed some in confinement, and permitted some to go free, with the loss of their hands or eyes.

Such are the only three reliable records relating to Hereward, and these agree in showing him to have been a gallant soldier, who, when the leading Saxons

in the Isle of Ely surrendered to the Conqueror, and his band, cut their way out of the island and fled to the fens. No mention is made in either of the two chronicles of Hereward being of the family of Earl Leofric, which, if he had been, judging from the manner in which the chronicles dealt with the other leading Saxons of the period, would have been done in this case. I would ask, "Do not the three entries confirm Doomsday?" They show that Hereward, knowing the nature of his native meres, a daring fen captain, preferred to retreat with his followers to the fortress of the marshes than give himself up to the cruel power of William I. And that in this impassable fortress, aided by a friendly population, he, most likely, for a time, carried on a guerilla warfare, to the terror of the foreigners, who had the fens apportioned to them; and that he most probably afterwards became reconciled to William, and held, until his death, property in Warwickshire and Worcestershire.

There may be some truth in Ingulph's account of Hereward's marriage with Torfrida, and his becoming reconciled to the Conqueror, and dying in peace.

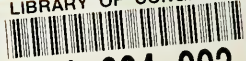
I hope that all who think that Hereward and Torfrida sleep in the ruined nave of Croyland, will remember the ruinous state of that once glorious pile, and contribute to the funds that now are being raised by the Rector to keep that church from destruction. Let us, as fenmen, be content with claiming Hereward, as a brave and skilful Lincolnshire soldier, who fearlessly drew his sword to defend his fatherland against a foreign foe, and with that courage that knows not defeat, scorned to surrender to the invader, until he was one of the last of the Saxons to bend his neck to the Norman yoke; and let us be proud of him as a fenman—as one of the *people*, and not one of those who, by their station should have led a united people against the invader, but by whose jealousies and treacheries, allowed the Conqueror of Hastings to so easily subjugate the nation; and as a bold and skilful esquire, disgusted with the action of the nobility, as a patriot, who determined with his neighbours to make a stand to save the fen country from being seized by William, is the picture I like to draw of Hereward.

W. E. FOSTER, F.S.A.

Aldershot, June, 1889.



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